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Conference Abstract

A Plant Based Artefact as a Document of War. Conservation and Preservation of a Wreath made of Yellow Everlasting and Purging Flax, Found on a Warsaw Insurgent's Grave

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Abstract

Within the collection of the Warsaw Rising Museum there are thousands of historic objects relating to the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Among 'typical' items such as weapons, archival documents and photographs, one can also find unusual souvenirs made of bread, horse hair, animal bones or plant material.

One extraordinary item is a wreath found on the Warsaw insurgent's grave. The wreath was made using yellow everlasting (*Helichrysum fulgidum* var. *nanum* or *Helichrysum aureum*) and purging flax (*Linum catharticum*) on a frame of steel wire. In 2005 the object was to be exhibited in the Deutsches Historisches Museum (Berlin, Germany) and required conservation assessment.

The object required immediate intervention. The wreath was covered with dust and ingrained dirt. The flowers were friable and partially disintegrated. There were some loose fragments of flowers that had detached from the whole construction. The conservation treatment endeavoured to stabilise, consolidate and reinforce the weakened elements.

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The wreath was dry cleaned with a delicate soft brush. Loose fragments served as samples to test the consolidation materials. Initial tests involved Paraloid B-72, frequently used to reinforce ethnographic plant-based artefacts, applied with brush. During application the solution formed clumps and would leave crystal-like residues. Moreover, the application with a brush turned out to be too invasive for the flower structure and risked disintegrating the plant material. Therefore further tests requiring the use of a brush were ruled out. It also excluded testing consolidants such as methyl cellulose. Given our capacity at that time, it was decided that a consolidant that may be applied as a sprayed solution would be used. At that time our conservation studio was not equipped with an ultrasonic nebuliser.

We used another detached flower fragment to test the fixative, commonly used for drawings, pastels and watercolours. The product, available as a spray solution, consists of ketonic resin, castor oil and alcohol. Tests gave satisfying results in the reinforcement of the flower and limited the accumulation of dirt. The fixative was then used to reinforce the whole wreath.

The wreath was placed in a purpose designed perspex box that served as both storage box and display case. The wreath was safely transported to Berlin where it was displayed for the next three years. After it was returned to the Warsaw Rising Museum, the condition assessment revealed that there were no changes in the artefact structure. Since then the wreath has been successfully exhibited in the permanent exhibition at the Warsaw Rising Museum.

Keywords

specimen, flowers, Paraloid, consolidation

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